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## *Water, time and a dark-green coat. On Chopin's Barcarolle*

**ABSTRACT:** The *Barcarolle*, Op. 60 is a late (1846) Chopin masterpiece. The shrewdest interpreters (Maurice Ravel, Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz) immediately understood that this miniature represents something much deeper than just a skilful stylisation based on Italian (Venetian?) melody. The author presents and discusses in detail several hermeneutic attempts at interpreting the meanings of the *Barcarolle*, devoting particular attention to Iwaszkiewicz's sketch '*Barkarola Chopina*'. He also draws attention to the peculiar rhetoric of the text (strongly marked aquatic motifs, accentuated polyvalence and the shimmering of meaning). He goes on to reveal striking connections between the semantics of Iwaszkiewicz's essay on the *Barcarolle* and his texts devoted to Venice. In the final section, he puts forward the hypothesis that the *Barcarolle* can be interpreted as a musical portrait of Venice – a portrait made of sounds, and so by definition vague, allusive and symbolic; a portrait in which the rocking and shimmering of the notes is also the shimmering of meaning.

**KEYWORDS:** Fryderyk Chopin, Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, *Barcarolle*, hermeneutic interpretation of music, polyvalence of meaning, Venice

### 1.

It begins quite startlingly: with an explosion in the left hand. A strongly, aggressively planted two-note chord. Yet it was supposed to be so nice... And it will be in a moment, fear not. But that is still to come. This *Barcarolle* starts oddly, very oddly. The title suggests a tonal postcard from a Venetian lagoon, some sugar-coated musical *veduta*, and yet here we have at once an unsettling blow. This peculiar opening immediately inverts our routine "horizon of expectations", forcing us, even, to consider what we really have before us: hardly an Italian trinket, so perhaps something more?

The *Barcarolle in F sharp major*, Op. 60 is a late (1846) masterpiece of Chopin's. A work dedicated to Baroness Stockhausen. A piece with a clear autobiographical stamp. A composition for which he felt a great passion. He even included it in the programme of his last (16 February 1848) public concert in Paris. By then, he was physically very weak. Those who attended the concert recalled that he produced the notes with considerable difficulty, and

even passages marked *forte* could barely be heard. The keenest commentators (Maurice Ravel, Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz) realised at once that this great little opus concealed vast swathes of meaning. That here was something deeper than just a skilful, deftly crafted stylisation based on Italian (Venetian?) melody. That it was something more than a standard example of Italianism in music – a manner relatively common in the Romantic musical literature (Franz Liszt, Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy).

So let us enquire what the *Barcarolle's* peculiar music – even compared with other original compositions by Chopin – is about. Not what it is (in terms of genre or style), but what it is *about*. Of course, such a question assumes that we accept a serious assertion regarding the ontology of music. Specifically, it suggests that the musical work (here: purely instrumental, dispensing with words) can contain, or at least can suggest in a more or less concrete way, in its structure and its narrative, certain non-musical content. It goes without saying that this is an assertion not shared by all music theorists, and the arguments for and against this hypothesis could fill a fairly large library. For want of space, I shall pass over the detailed issues relating to this question. And I shall declare at once my allegiance to the “positive” interpretation in that dispute. But with a crucial rider in which the experience of a believing and practising anthropologist will also come to bear.

In a nutshell, music means. But not in the way that is characteristic of language; if music is a language, then it is a very particular one. It expresses and communicates, but not in the way that natural language does. In my reading of the *Barcarolle*, my springboard is a hermeneutic strategy. I assume that a musical “text” can contain special places that are similar in profile to symbolic expressions. And so I favour the quasi-symbolic nature of the musical “text”. Its structure and expression do not imitate natural language, but have an element of symbolic expression in their essence. Symbolic, and so not revealing the evoked sense immediately, literally, directly, but – according to Immanuel Kant’s classic formula (which once so delighted Paul Ricoeur) – “gives rise to thought”. Thus it does not aim directly and palpably at meanings, but is a structure in which “content irrationally flickers through expression”<sup>1</sup>. In other words, musical meanings – like symbolic structures – are open, indefinite, opaque, polyvalent and cannot be discursively dismantled.<sup>2</sup> And just as crucially, the reading of a symbol demands the active labour of the one who receives it. As Sergey Averintsev, a seasoned student of symbolic texts, writes:

<sup>1</sup> Jurij Łotman [Yuri Lotman], ‘Symbol w systemie kultury’ [Symbol in the cultural system], tr. Bogusław Żyłko, *Polska Sztuka Ludowa* 3 (1988), 151.

<sup>2</sup> Thus my understanding of “symbol” differs somewhat from the propositions of musicologists; cf. Carl Dahlhaus and Hans Heinrich Eggebrecht, *Co to jest muzyka?*, tr. Dorota Lachowska, introd. Michał Bristiger (Warszawa, 1992), 113–125 [Ger. orig. *Was ist Musik?* (Wilhelmshaven, 1985)].

The sense of a symbol objectively manifests itself not as a ready presence, but as a dynamic tendency: it is not given, but attributed. This sense, to put it exactly, should not be *explained*, reducing it to an unequivocal, logical formula, but can only be elucidated, relating it to further symbolic connections, which approach rational clarity, but do not attain the quality of pure notions.<sup>3</sup>

This last remark is exceptionally valuable, since it points to the cognitively important co-essentiality of the symbolic material and the language in which it is spoken of. In our case: tonal material and verbal commentary.

## 2.

Let us return to the *Barcarolle*, and ask once again: what is this music about? The excellent exegesis given by Piotr Anderszewski in Bruno Monsaingeon's film documentary *Piotr Anderszewski. Voyageur intranquille* (Medici Arts, 2009) is culturally seasoned. In a remarkably witty talk, given from the keyboard (while performing fragments of the work!), the pianist brings out the phenomenally precise and meticulously conceived logic of the work. Playing through the opening, he discerns various Italian titbits. Here are the first couple of bars ("I'm put in mind of a bowl of pasta"), the next few notes ("this is like the song of an inebriated gondolier"), a slight slowing, as if to listen more closely to the phrase he is playing ("beautiful – in spite of everything"), and a moment later a grimace ("something resembling a poor French song"), before the unexpected punch-line: "Chopin is so complicated!". An opinionated music lesson in a quick one-minute fix.

There is no sense, of course, in treating these frivolous associations too seriously. I would not attach too much weight to such impressionistic perceptions, but then again I would not disregard them entirely. In his one-off (alas, so short!) educational "show", Anderszewski achieves something quite rare. He brilliantly reveals the secrets behind the *Barcarolle's* architecture. He shows that extraordinary ability of Chopin's to oscillate between the musically banal (consciously employed) and the musically profound. And he demonstrates, along the way, how it is that one and the other are bound into a structurally coherent whole. More than that, even if we make allowance for the jaunty tone of his commentary (justified! – as I shall endeavour to show below), then the value of this "interpretation" lies in the fact that it suggests the existence in the "text" of the *Barcarolle* of some important underlying semantics. By the same stroke, we venture far from the plate of spaghetti towards much deeper references. So what are they?

<sup>3</sup> Siergiej Awierincew [Sergey Averintsev], 'Symbol', tr. Zbigniew Benedyktowicz, *Polska Sztuka Ludowa* 3 (1988), 149.

One of the most interesting and insightful exegetes of the *Barcarolle*, in my opinion, is Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz. In his sketch '*Barkarola Chopina*', from 1933, he indeed suggested the existence in this miniature of an intriguing deep semantic layer.<sup>4</sup> In many respects, this remains an excellent text, and it is worth examining more closely, for at least several reasons. Firstly, to see the paths taken by the creative imagination of an outstanding (and pianistically trained) listener. Secondly, to examine more closely the author's rhetorical strategy. And thirdly, because I would like to take up some of the observations it contains as a starting point for my own intuitions.

Iwaszkiewicz's sketch is sometimes classified as an example of a literary interpretation, but such a designation (distinctly pejorative, needless to say, from the point of view of hard science) says very little. And it even leads us astray. It suggests above all some irresponsible fantasising, a free translating of tonal abstraction into some more or less successful linguistic phrases. Yet in the case of Iwaszkiewicz, this question is more complex. Whilst we certainly are dealing with a subtle literary disquisition, full of metaphor and comparison, and also more or less justified associations, it is worth noting that the author is wholly aware of this strategy. He fully realises that the power of words barely comes close to the essence of music. He is entirely convinced of the idiomatic nature of the "language" of music. Hence he immediately declares his fundamental doubt as to the possibility of translating a work of music (or, for that matter, of art or of poetry) into a different system of signs. Interestingly, however, he also places little hope in the purely formal language of description, poking fun at a certain "German professor" (seemingly Hugo Leichtentritt...) and his remarkable discovery that "the *Barcarolle* is written in the form of a large song with the use in the reprise of motifs from the middle section"<sup>5</sup>, adding that this sentence's powers of elucidation are equal to those of the terms previously invoked by Iwaszkiewicz himself: "night, fear, trees and ink"<sup>6</sup>. So neither purely technical definitions nor vivid language can give an adequate idea of the *Barcarolle*. The conclusion leaves us in no doubt: "What takes place within this musical work (*das musikalische Geschehen*) must remain within its boundaries and act on the listener only within those boundaries"<sup>7</sup>.

Very well then. If that is the case, if every description of a musical work is doomed to defeat, one may pertinently enquire: so why does the author, in spite of everything, decide on a verbal exegesis of Chopin's work? In another text, written in 1935, devoted to Chopin's *F minor Ballade*, Op. 52, Iwasz-

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<sup>4</sup> Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, '*Barkarola Chopina*', in *Dziedzictwo Chopina i szkice muzyczne* [Chopin's legacy and musical sketches] (Warszawa, 2010), 9–13 [originally published in *Wiadomości Literackie* 55 (1933)].

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

kiewicz gives a certain answer to that question, incidentally mentioning his sketch on the *Barcarolle* in the very first paragraph. That is, he expresses the conviction that, although all writing about music is in essence “ostensibly a lost cause”, nonetheless “every devotee of great music feels the need to speak about his beloved art and, striving to objectivise his individual perceptions, creates something resembling a philosophy of music”<sup>8</sup>. This sounds a little like an unintentional paraphrase of the last paragraph of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*: thereof one must speak, whereof one cannot be silent. It may be understood thus: whilst fully aware that words are always an inadequate translation of tonal material, there exists in the passionate listener some inner imperative which *in spite of everything* bids him name, give verbal expression to, the heard. Of course, a verbal construct of this sort, although referring to a musical artefact, will always be to some extent a self-portrait of the author. Yet it is not perforce entirely devoid of cognitive value:

My sketch about Chopin’s *Barcarolle*, published a few years ago, proved to me, however, that pondering the essence of a musical phenomenon, although it never gives and cannot give any final result, may be linked to some kind of benefit.<sup>9</sup>

So let us look more closely at what Iwaszkiewicz heard in Chopin’s *Barcarolle*, so as to derive from his remarks “some kind of benefit” for ourselves.

Iwaszkiewicz leads his principal theme somewhat circuitously. First he states that great works of art contain a certain element, hard to define, which acts on the receiver in a liberating way: it opens up before him certain spaces that he had not suspected, revealing some “completely different” world. The existence of such an element is beyond doubt; the only problem is with naming it exactly and defining it. One way or another, it arouses in the receiver a sense of fear and longing, although doubtless not only those feelings. That element – let us call it for now a “numinotic” element, after Rudolf Otto – appears in the *Barcarolle*. It bears the name *pavor nocturnus*:

It is a fear that fills us with sweetness, like the thought of floating over dark water into a summer’s night. Let us imagine a black sheet of water and stars above the water, and clouds, everything immersed in the night as if in a great pit, distant and removing our sense of reality. Now, echoes of childhood expeditions will surface within us, be it late walks in the forest or needless dallying by dark water; or else just sitting in the porch in front of the house when a nightingale sings in the shadows, frogs croak, and aromatic “nocturnal adornments” open up – as witnesses to unknown night-time activities, occurring outside us. We discern those old recollections – and then youthful anxieties, when we first become aware of the might and ubiquitousness of the eternal night – in that night which passes in the

<sup>8</sup>Iwaszkiewicz, ‘O *Balladzie f-moll Chopina*’, in *Dziedzictwo Chopina*, 13.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 14.

mirror of the night, in all that surrounds us. This tears from us our bodies, and we remain incorporeal, as our boat floats noiselessly across the inky sheet. The murmur of the trees, stranded like black shadows along the banks, reaches us rather as a scent, the aroma of foliage, sonorous and soft, the salutations of that which by day is verdure and by night is a sighing. The nearby reeds do not tie us to the earth with their frail threads, and we pass over the water into nothingness. By now, everything is in such a diapason that death ceases to harry us.

The *Barcarolle* is more or less such a trip.<sup>10</sup>

Yes, of course, this all sounds too literary compared to what we are accustomed to today. Perhaps what is most striking in this impression is the narrative element, so foreign to contemporary reflection on the musical “text”, further enhanced with an anecdotal dimension. No one writes like that about music today for fear of ridicule, or at best of being numbered among the “literati” (and that isn’t a compliment). But heeding not those textual anachronisms, let us follow that trail a while. What did Iwaszkiewicz hear in the *Barcarolle*? Perhaps first and foremost its universal dimension, sweeping up and overpowering the listener. Then, its power to evoke deep content, below the threshold, rarely coming to the fore. He speaks of this music’s ability to penetrate the deep deposits of individual memory. Of how it reveals to us some primary scene, touches within us something elemental, profound, archaic. One observes the presence of nature in this visionary reading. There is water, a forest, frogs, nightingales, the sighing of trees, the rustling of reeds... He then goes on to describe the thick splice of themes, comparing it to a woodland thicket; and the *Barcarolle*’s harmonies, so he suggests, have something of Monet’s water-lilies about them. All in all, it is the element of water that dominates: dark water, rushes, reeds, a floating boat... But something else besides: there is some perceptible cosmic breath in this fragment. The heavens, clouds, an opening up to dark infinity and the menace of a night sky. There is also a distinct motif of liberation from one’s body, of discarding one’s mortal shell, something – some element of this musical narration – that leaves us stripped of reality, unreal, deprived of strong foundations, as in that breathtaking passage in which the author writes that nothing keeps us on the Earth anymore and “we pass over the water into nothingness”. But Iwaszkiewicz is stressing in this passage not only the metaphysical fear that is present in Chopin’s miniature, but also the pantheistic elements, some desire for reuniting, to reconcile oneself to reality. There are thrills here, “immense and frightful comforts”, but also – as in the ending – bright, luminous moments, filled with internal light.

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<sup>10</sup> Iwaszkiewicz, ‘*Barkarola Chopina*’, 10.

"The *Barcarolle* is more or less such a trip". Rather less, or rather more? Is everything mentioned above really in this work? Let us not rush our answer. Iwaszkiewicz does not just dwell on the associative aura connected with Chopin's composition, but also drops a couple of remarks on its structure. Of course, despite the fact that musical terms do appear from time to time in this sketch, we are still at the opposite pole to formal analysis; metaphoric approximations and a poetic foreshortening. He is particularly anxious to bring out the peculiarity and exceptional nature of Chopin's miniature:

The themes of the *Barcarolle* are very different to the themes of other works by Chopin; that may be why the *Barcarolle* has remained so long in the shadows. In the colouring of these themes, in the erratic asymmetry of the periods, there are things so very foreign to the "Chopinian melancholy" loved years before that this work could not be understood for a long time after its composition. It stood perhaps the furthest beyond the framework and schemata in which Chopin was apprehended. It could not be called either "morbid" music or "melancholy" music. It contains so much healthy singing and athletic effort of rowers' lungs.

Already the very call of the long-unassuaged dominant, placed at the beginning, fills us with a wide breath like a great gulp of extraordinary air. We enter a reservoir of ozonised forests and water, and for the first time draw air into our lungs: *sfogato*. This initial cleansing becomes the principal theme of the entire work; it is the full substance of this song about water and time.<sup>11</sup>

Iwaszkiewicz's entire exegesis is stretched across two opposing elements: brightness and darkness, transparency and shade. For him, the *Barcarolle* is primarily an intriguing impressionist image (Claude Debussy *avant la lettre*), a musical reflection of a landscape. Yet this is not a straightforward illustration of nature, of some particular fragment, but its formally refined sublimation. It is not just the pastoral, soothing dimension at issue here. Iwaszkiewicz heard in the *Barcarolle* pantheistic elements, but what is particularly worth emphasising is that he also heard some undefined dark root, so strongly present within it from the very first note. And perhaps most importantly, stressing several times the motif of slackening, cleansing and "limpid brightness" that fills the work, in the conclusion of his arguments, he accentuates its unfathomed mystery. In this respect – dwelling on the limit of the incomprehensible, the inestimable – the *Barcarolle* reminds him of Giorgio da Giorgioni's *Pastoral Concert*:

The plane onto which the work's tonal material is laid, covers, like a green net, a perspective equally as distant as the landscape of the *Concert champêtre*. The questions that are piled up by such moments as the *dolce sfogato*, iterated many times, or bars 103-110 are without response. An answer is given by neither the

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 11-12.

concentric ritornellos, glittering towards the end in the light of a sunlit perspective, nor the final passage covering the new theme hummed by the tenor – a theme from which a new *Barcarolle* in Wagnerian style could be elaborated, nor the triumphant closing octaves. For these questions have no answer in this world.<sup>12</sup>

In Iwaszkiewicz's exegesis, the *Barcarolle* is not only a peculiar work, unlike anything Chopin had ever written, but it also clearly emanates meanings of a higher order (although they are not here named outright); it is a liminal work, placing us before the unknowable. These verbal approximations may continue to appear too literary and too distant from the musical substrate, but for anyone who has lingered over this work, the poet's statements do not seem like a glaring abuse. Quite the opposite: we have the impression that they are revealing something most crucial in the music of the *Barcarolle*, although we do not necessarily have to agree with the author's every sentence. So what do they reveal? Above all, a fundamental ambivalence that can be grasped relatively clearly: a formal, but also semantic, ambivalence ("fear that fills us with sweetness") that builds the structure of this most unusual work, which conceals mysterious depths ("some meanings lurk behind Chopin's *Barcarolle*").

### 3.

Iwaszkiewicz's text is intriguing not just on account of what he says, but also because of what he *does not* say, what he omits. For careful readers of his prose and poetry, it must be quite surprising that he makes not the slightest reference to the *Barcarolle's* Venetian connections. It seems almost impossible that such an enthusiastic admirer of Venice and such a sensitive portraitist of the City of the Doges could have failed to notice (and if he noticed, then not noted) anything Venetian in this work. This is all the more curious in that the very title already directs even a less well-orientated listener in the direction of Venetian sounds and associations. Iwaszkiewicz could not have been unaware of this. So why is there nothing about Venice in his text? Why the lack of even a mention of the gondolier's song? An unequivocal answer is, of course, difficult to provide. Perhaps the most likely guess would be that in interpreting the *Barcarolle*, Iwaszkiewicz did not want to fall into the trap of importunate illustrativeness: the fact that the title of Chopin's masterpiece overly invokes the name of the song performed by Venetian gondoliers (as virtually every commentator on this little work feels obliged to emphasise) need not immediately mean that we are dealing with a

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 13.



"Venetian" (in whatever sense) work. One sees clearly that Iwaszkiewicz, although visualising the "text" of the *Barcarolle* in various ways, although stressing that it is a subtle tonal tale of a watery landscape, at the same time emphasises that we do not have here something concrete that can be pinpointed and named, but that we are faced with an image that is musically abstract. That this is the *sublimation* of a landscape, and not its banal *illustration*.

But are there really no Venetian tropes in Iwaszkiewicz's text? It seems that there are, and not all that deeply concealed; one must only read the text more carefully, and above all take account when reading of other literary contexts. As we stated earlier, the poet's interpretation is dominated by the aquatic element.<sup>13</sup> The landscape of the *Barcarolle* is a mainly watery landscape, and its wateriness is depicted in various ways. Of course, it does not necessarily ensue from suggestions of the watery material of this work that the water here is flowing in Venetian canals. No doubt. But let us take a closer look at the sentences of the commentary.

A detail that gives one pause: whilst water is mentioned several times in the text, it is telling that this is not clear, limpid, running water. On the contrary: it is rather stagnant, murky water, as if swampy, nocturnal; water of a greenish hue, dark ("inky sheet"), even black ("black sheet of water"). Something else catches our attention: the dominant presence of the colour green in the characterisation not just of natural elements (as is understandable), but of structural elements of the work! And so the verdure of trees, lianas and foliage. But Iwaszkiewicz writes also of the "**dark-green** thicket of the accompaniment", of the key of F sharp major, which casts "its **dark-green** coat over the wonderful form of this work and sounds like soothing", of how "the work's tonal material is laid, covers, like a **green** net, a perspective equally as distant as the landscape of the *Concert champêtre*". And elsewhere that "this work of Chopin's fills up with a transparent **green** brightness". So we have green of various kinds: from the luminous, clear and sunny to dark shades. But for me, interpretatively the most interesting suggestion would appear to be the analogy between dark, greeny water and the dark-green key of the work.

So why does this colourful characterisation of Chopin's work not appear to be accidental and semantically innocent? Let us see how Iwaszkiewicz portrayed Venice, since his descriptions will lead us onto a certain trail. Here is a modest, but representative, selection of quotes from Iwaszkiewicz's "Venetian" works. In an essay from *Podróże do Włoch* [Journeys to Italy], in an

<sup>13</sup> Maria Piotrowska mentions the aquatic dominant of Iwaszkiewicz's interpretation, but does not draw any conclusions from this observation, see Maria Piotrowska, 'Późny Chopin. Uwagi o dziełach ostatnich', in *Przemiany stylu Chopina* [Changes in Chopin's style], ed. Maciej Gołąb (Kraków, 1993), 167; Eng. tr. as "Late Chopin." Remarks on the Last Works', tr. Joanna Niżyńska and Peter Schertz, *Polish Music Journal* 1 (2000).

account of Venice ("the most peculiar city in the world"<sup>14</sup>), of its curiosities and the ambivalent impressions it arouses, we find several remarks on the colour of the Venetian waters: "the water of the canals [...] is indescribable; it has wide, fan-like waves and looks as if it were painted"<sup>15</sup>, "the water in the canal **black as ink**"<sup>16</sup>, "the terrible dirt of the canals"<sup>17</sup>, and he compares it elsewhere to "**malachites of dirtied waters** that long since ceased to be clean"<sup>18</sup>. And so dark, dirty waters of dark, dingy green. A similar colour scheme appears in his poems, where Iwaszkiewicz intensely evokes negative, dark, thanatological connotations of the Venetian water. We read the following: "And today in the lagoon's **dead waters** / An empty black boat floats up"<sup>19</sup>, "The **green water's** eaten eyes, / The **green water** eats up souls"<sup>20</sup>, "Gold streaks on the **putrid water**"<sup>21</sup>. And in yet another Venetian poem, although the water motif does not appear, a thumbnail portrait of the city is veiled with the colours we now know well: "In this **black-greenish** city, / Filled with pink bones"<sup>22</sup>. Enough said.

My suggestion is simple, almost self-evident: in Iwaszkiewicz, there is a striking analogy between the metaphoric characterisation of Chopin's work and the characterisation of the waters of Venice that appears in his other texts; indeed, of Venice itself. So if the dark (at times even black) green of the *Barcarolle*, understood in a concrete, natural, but also essential way ("dark-green coat"), is, on the symbolic plane, the equivalent of the putrid, dark-green (at times "inky") waters of Venice, of that "greenish-black" city, then one may venture the conclusion that in Iwaszkiewicz's description, Chopin's masterpiece is a musical portrait of Venice. That the *Barcarolle* is its musical condensation. Let us add straight away: this is an indistinct, undefined, allusive, indeed symbolic portrait ("content irrationally flickers through expression"), in which the rocking or shimmering of the notes is at once also the shimmering of meaning. Interestingly, it is also an ambiguous, chiaroscuro portrait, with all the ambivalence that accompanies poetical descriptions of the city. With the difference that in the tonal portrait of Venice there would be more light, more bright green; in his verbal portrait of Venice, Iwaszkiewicz more often strikes a dark, sombre, ominous, even apocalyptic note.

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<sup>14</sup> Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, *Podróże do Włoch* [Journeys to Italy] (Warszawa, 1980), 43 (emphasis D. C.).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>19</sup> Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, *Urania i inne wiersze* ['Urania' and other poems] (Warszawa, 2007), 237.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 236.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 234.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 233.

## 4.

It seems to me that the suggestion expressed above is not only supported by the evidential material, but – still, of course, as a hypothesis – it is considerably more thought-provoking than (quite naive) attempts to seek in the music of the *Barcarolle* the illustration of particular events. Whilst it is true that the music of this nocturne does indeed flow, rocking at times in the quasi-ostinato rhythm of the accompaniment, exegetes are not infrequently stubbornly concrete: they hear (wish to hear?) in the *Barcarolle* the undulating waves of a lagoon. Or the rocking of a gondola moving softly along Venetian canals. One commentator, doubtless with an overactive imagination, has even discerned there a “storm on the Venice canal” (Orrin Howard). Another, in turn, has divined a “love scene in a cosy gondola” (Karl Tausig)...

That may well be. It is possible (although highly improbable) that this is all “there”. Yet more valid would seem to be the thesis that if, for Chopin, the *Barcarolle* really did have something in common with Venice, if there was supposed to be some tonal allusion to that city, then it was certainly not in a trivial illustrative sense! Chopin did not compose musical tableaux or write programme music. An all too clear signal here is the first theme from the beginning of the work. The one which Anderszewski associated with the singing of an inebriated gondolier. But indeed, most aptly! Let us just add that this intuition does not concern the troubles of a Venetian boatman linked to alcohol abuse, but rather questions of a purely musical nature. The first theme, suspiciously melodious, somewhat sugar-coated, led in thirds and sixths, is a patent leg-pull! In this fragment, the element of parody, of mocking, of which Chopin was so fond, comes to the fore.<sup>23</sup> Piotr Wierzbicki is right when he drops the terse remark that the beginning of the *Barcarolle* is quite simply... funny.<sup>24</sup> Absolutely! Anderszewski heard it unerringly. And indeed, the opening looks like an amusing gag, a deliberate joke: there may well be undulating water in these notes, a tipsy gondolier, and even a steaming pan of pasta... But it is all further subjected to ironic travesty.

<sup>23</sup> “Chopin’s style was to be a notorious mocker. Chopin’s style was to spy on the gestures of the body and the movements of the soul. [...] Chopin does not describe the world, he rarely tells of its history, does not contemplate it. He chooses for himself – in confronting the world, in expressing the world, in serving the world – a different role. He is an imitator of its states, flickering and gestures. His whole genius as the most comical tomfoolery under the sun, manifested at the piano [...] that whole art, casually made manifest in his spying on and aping of acquaintances, is turned to good effect in works that transfix with an eruption of earnestness, a sumptuousness of *pertinence* and a scrupulousness in his reckoning with the ‘other side’. That ‘other side’ is the world”. Piotr Wierzbicki, *Migotliwy ton. Esej o stylu Chopina* [A flickering tone. An essay on Chopin’s style] (Warszawa, 2010), 43–44.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

Let us state clearly: the opening phrases are the sentimental “picture” of Venice from popular depictions. That is the starting point for Chopin, who appears to be perfectly aware of what he is playing at.<sup>25</sup> And of what building blocks he initially has at his disposal. But everything of most importance is played out afterwards. The greatness of this miniature lies precisely in the break from the reusable tonal platitude, from melody-writing by numbers. Chopin does not write an atmospheric barcarolle in the style of Mendelssohn (*Barcarolle*, Op. 30 No. 6). By means of incredibly complex harmonies, chromatic modulations, breathtaking dissonances and passage-work, he leads his own “Venetian” thoughts into regions of musical heresy. He quite comprehensively darkens the initial bright image and consciously breaks the logic of aesthetic pleasure. He inverts the cantilena niceties and all at once inlays dissonances into this idyll. He creates a “picture” that has nothing in common with a postcard of Venice.<sup>26</sup>

Incidentally, if we were indeed to seek pictorial analogies to the music of the *Barcarolle* (not a wholly senseless pursuit<sup>27</sup>), then in all certainty its equivalent could not be found among clichéd and predictable Venetian landscapists. To my mind, only some of the Venetian watercolours of William Turner measure up to Chopin’s unexpected twists and subversive harmonies. Among nineteenth-century painters, perhaps only Turner succeeded in avoiding Venetian triteness, cliché and the visually facile. Unexpected points of view (*Veduta dell’atrio dell Palazzo Reale*, 1833), elaborate harmonies of colour (*Tramonto su Venezia*, 1840), washed brushstrokes (*San Giorgio*

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<sup>25</sup> Chopin seems to intuitively understand that the mawkish melody of a Venetian barcarolle is an overplayed card of a collective imagination. Moreover, in the poetry of the first part of the nineteenth century, for instance, the motif of the barcarolle (or “barcarola”, significantly rhyming with “gondola”, another fixed prop) was among the most conventional elements of Venetian verse. Lev Loseff demonstrates this to splendid effect, taking Russian poetry as his example (“Over the water glides the gondola, / Sparks spatter beneath the oar, / I hear a delicate barcarola, / The notes by the breeze are borne” – Ivan Kozlov, 1825; nb. Glinka composed music to the first three stanzas of this poem), see Lew Łosiew [Lev Loseff], ‘Wenecja Josifa Brodskiego’ [Josif Brodsky’s Venice], tr. Dymitr Romanowski, *Konteksty* 1–2 (2003), 150.

<sup>26</sup> It is difficult, therefore, to fully concur with Tadeusz A. Zieliński’s opinion that the *Barcarolle* “brings an apotheosis of the sun, fine weather, warmth and intense, glaring, seemingly blinding brightness”, see Tadeusz A. Zieliński, *Chopin. Życie i droga twórcza* [Chopin. His life and creative path] (Kraków, 1993), 559. The *Barcarolle* is not a work played out on a single note. And even if it does contain bright, luminous places (the famous *dolce sfogato*, of which Iwaszkiewicz writes), there are also several other fragments (as Zieliński himself mentions) which effectively muddy the unequivocal qualification quoted above.

<sup>27</sup> Zieliński writes: “This inwardly modest, undramatic little tale is also distinguished by considerable pictorial qualities: tonal timbre and colouring are of primary importance in this music, and they are also highly individual, distinctive even from other works by Chopin”. Zieliński, *Chopin*, 560.

*Maggiore*, 1840)... Yes, in these frames – microcosms, as Andrew Wilton would have it<sup>28</sup> – one might find Chopin's rebellious spirit and the compelling force of his artistic vision.<sup>29</sup>

If the intuition suggested here is correct, in the most general terms, then further possibilities for interpretation, now freed from historical context, open up. Let us recall that most apt aphoristic phrase of Iwaszkiewicz's about the *Barcarolle*: "this song about water and time".

In reading those words, an attentive reader of Josif Brodsky's *Watermark* is inevitably put in mind of the principal refrain of that poetical portrait of Venice. That equation recurring frequently in the text: water is the image of time, water *alias* time. For Brodsky, it is in this very image that the essence of the Venetian experience is condensed. Additionally, one of the aquatic passages in this text brings to the description of the city an elaborate musical metaphor. More than that: it contains familiar colouristic motifs:

For water is also a choral work, and that in many respects. [...] It is hardly surprising that this water – rivalling the firmament – has the tint of **muddy green** by day, and in at night is **tarry black**. It is a true miracle that, treated for over a millennium in various ways – both good and bad – it has no holes in it, but is constantly the same old H<sub>2</sub>O (although we wouldn't drink it), that it continues to rise. It actually resembles the notation of music played by us without pause to the rhythm of the tide, a score where the staves of the canals are intersected by the countless bar lines of the bridges, dotted with the notes of the reflected windows and the legato slurs of the finials, not to mention the necks of the gondolas bent like treble clefs.<sup>30</sup>

All the motifs so strongly accentuated here mysteriously connect with those discussed earlier; they connect with and illumine one another. These sentences, treated here like a small fragment of the history of imagination, further confirm our initial conjecture that one can see in Iwaszkiewicz's watery passages about Chopin's *Barcarolle* an allusive tale about the Venetian waters of the lagoon, and understand the work itself as a musical picture of the city.

Yet it is all but words. The *Barcarolle* is greater than everything said and written about it. I listen to it once more. Horowitz, Richter, Bunin, Argerich, Zimerman, Arrau, Fliter, Hamelin, Planès... And the greatest of them all –

<sup>28</sup> *Venezia. Acquerelli di Turner*, preface by Andrew Wilton (Milan, 2008), 6.

<sup>29</sup> On the cover of a disc containing Chopin's preludes (and the *Barcarolle*) performed by Stanislav Bunin (BeArTon, 2004), we find reproductions of paintings by William Turner. And that is good – I admire the record label's intuition.

<sup>30</sup> Josif Brodski [Josif Brodsky], *Znak wodny* [Watermark], tr. Stanisław Barańczak (Kraków, 1993), 75–76 (emphasis, D. C.).

Ivan Moravec. In his inspired interpretation of this “solitary masterpiece” (Jim Samson), he reveals ever new and unsensed meanings of this work...

*Translated by John Comber*